

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

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## HORATIO ALGER, JR. AND RAGGED DICK

By Kenneth L. Donelson



### DIME NOVEL SKETCHES No. 197

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## HORATIO ALGER, JR. AND RAGGED DICK: REALITY AND MYTH

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Almost no author writing specifically for boys was as popular during his time as Horatio Alger, Jr. Not only did Alger write popular books, he reflected the "rags to riches" mystique of his era and almost single handed provided boys with models of young ragamuffins/waifs who moved steadily from poverty to respectability and the beginnings of affluence.

*Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York* was published by A. K. Loring in Boston in either 1867 or 1868, depending upon whether you give credence to Mott or Gruber,<sup>1</sup> after it had already proved successful as a serial in *Oliver Optic's* magazine *Student and Schoolmate* (the first installment appeared January 1867). *Ragged Dick* was Alger's eighth book but his first major success. While the prototype of the Alger hero is self-evident today, it was not so when *Ragged Dick* first appeared. Indeed, this seemed something of a new kind of book for young people. The central character was a ragged and dirty but honest and clean-thinking boy living amidst the sins and evils of the big city.

The plot, like most Alger books, is essentially a series of semi-connected episodes in which we watch a boy take the first steps toward maturity, respectability, and affluence. When we first meet *Ragged Dick*, he is being awakened by a porter. Dick sleeps in a "wooden box half full of straw, on which the young bootblack had reposed his weary limbs, and slept as soundly as if it had been a bed of down."<sup>2</sup> Alger rapidly introduces us to Dick's appearance, as he does so often in other books.

Dick's appearance as he stood by the box was rather peculiar. His pants were torn in several places, and had apparently belonged in the first instance to a boy two sizes larger than himself. He wore a vest, all the buttons of which were gone except two, out of which peeked a shirt which looked as if it had been worn a month. To complete his costume he wore a coat too long for him, dating back, if one might judge from its general appearance, to a remote antiquity . . . but in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly, and their faces inspired distrust; but Dick had a frank, straight-forward manner that made him a favorite.<sup>3</sup>

This typical description of the Alger hero obviously is intended to convey much to the reader. Our hero is poor, wearing hand-me-down clothing, but he is attractive, hardworking, and an excellent candidate for upward mobility. Almost as rapidly as we are introduced to our poor honest waif, Alger injects a note of what he apparently thinks is humor. Bootblack Dick goes to work and he and his first customer go through the following dialogue.

"Ten cents! Isn't that a little steep?"

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'Well, you know 'taint all clear profit,' said Dick, who had already set to work. 'There's the blacking costs something, and I have to get a new brush pretty often.'

'And you have a large rent too,' said the gentleman quizzically, with a glance at a large hole in Dick's coat.

'Yes, sir,' said Dick, always ready to joke; 'I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun up on Fifth Avenoo, that I can't afford to take less than ten cents a shine. I'll give you a bully shine, sir.'

'Be quick about it, for I am in a hurry. So your house is on Fifth Avenue, is it?'

'It isn't anywhere else,' said Dick, and Dick spoke the truth there.

'What tailor do you patronize?' asked the gentleman, surveying Dick's attire.

'Would you like to go to the same one?' asked Dick, shrewdly.

'Well, no; it strikes me that he didn't give you a very good fit.'

'This coat once belonged to General Washington,' said Dick, comically, 'He wore it all through the Revolution, and it got torn some, 'cause he fit so hard. When he died he told his widdier to give it to some smart young feller that hadn't got none of his own; so she gave it to me. But if you'd like it, sir, to remember General Washington by, I'll let you have it reasonable.'<sup>4</sup>

And so on, and so on, and so on. Humor was never Alger's forte.

Shortly thereafter, Dick shines the shoes of a Mr. Greyson who gives him a quarter, says he can't wait for the change, and asks Dick to bring the fifteen cents' change to him later at his office. Dick is surprised, but the reader has already guessed that this is one of Dick's trials, proof Alger can establish in the reader's mind and in Mr. Greyson's mind of Dick's honesty and reliability. After failing the attempt of a store clerk to cheat him out of \$2.00, Dick overhears Mr. Whitney talking to his nephew Frank. Frank, new to the city, is in need of a guide, and Dick volunteers. To no one's surprise, barring an incredulous reader, Frank is pleased and Mr. Whitney is willing, and the two boys set out on a tour of the city which occupies Chapters III through XI. Before their peregrinations around New York City, Frank gives Dick a half-worn suit and Dick gets cleaned so that the two boys look at least remotely comparable. Alger does a far better job of describing the poverty and filth of the streets during the long walk than many of his literary detractors would admit or recognize. Dick and Frank develop a camaraderie as they stroll by the News Boys Lodging House on Fulton Street, A. T. Stewart store, the New York Hospital, the St. Nicholas and Metropolitan Hotels, the Mercantile Library, the Cooper Institute, the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and Central Park. Dick's knowledge of the streets and con men help them to ward off an accusation of stealing a purse from a woman and to help a country bumpkin who's been swindled out of \$50.00. As they stroll, Frank and Dick exchange views, and their conversations are meant to prepare the reader for Dick's rise to respectability.

'You're a good fellow,' said Dick, gratefully. 'I'm afraid I'm a pretty rough customer, but I ain't as bad as some. I mean to turn over a new leaf, and try to grow up 'spectable.'

'There've been a great many boys begin as low down as you, Dick, that have grown up respectable and honored. But they had to work pretty hard for it.'

'I'm willin' to work hard,' said Dick.

'And you must not only work hard, but work in the right way.'

'What's the right way?'

'You began in the right way when you determined never to steal, or do anything mean or dishonorable, however strongly tempted to do so. That will make people have confidence in you when they come to know you. But, in order to succeed well, you must manage to get as good an education as you can. Until you do, you cannot get a position in an office or counting-room, even to run errands.'

'That's so,' said Dick soberly. 'I never thought how awful ignorant I was till now.'

'That can be remedied with perseverance,' said Frank. 'A year will do a great deal for you.'

'I'll go to work and see what I can do,' said Dick, energetically.<sup>5</sup>

After dropping off Frank at the Astor House, Dick vows to improve himself, goes to a slightly better restaurant than he usually frequents, and takes up new lodgings in a reasonably respectable home. Later, he runs into his chief adversary, Mickey Maguire, and has a fight which Dick wins. By this time, Dick has become truly ambitious, and he has begun to put his money into a bank, saving where he once would have spent his meager earnings on the Old Bowery Theatre and Tony Pastor's and smoking, even occasionally gambling. His full name, which we first learned when he deposits his money, is Dick Hunter. The next day he feels guilt at not having returned the fifteen cents still owed Mr. Greyson even though it is only one day later. Pleased, Mr. Greyson asks Dick to come to his church where Greyson teaches Sunday School. Later that same day, he befriends Henry Fosdick who, in return for sharing Dick's room, agrees to tutor Dick and make him literate. Dick learns fast and he even learns how to pray. The following Sunday, Dick and Henry go to Mr. Greyson's church and then to Mr. Greyson's home for Sunday dinner. Although Dick feels ill at ease, Mr. and Mrs. Greyson and their young daughter, Ida, make Dick feel welcome, and to Dick's surprise, he finds talking to Ida exciting if somewhat unnerving. When they leave the Greyson home, Mickey Maguire attacks Dick once again and is, as usual, vanquished. Dick now knows that he has truly changed his life.

It will not be necessary to chronicle the events of the next few weeks.

A new life had commenced for Dick. He no longer haunted the gallery of the Old Bowery; and even Tony Pastor's hospitable doors had lost their old attractions. He spent two hours every evening in study. His progress was astonishingly rapid. He was gifted with a natural quickness; and he was stimulated by the desire to acquire a fair education as a means of 'growin' up 'spectable,' as he termed it. Much was due also to the patience and perseverance of Henry Fosdick, who made a capital teacher.<sup>6</sup>

Dick, recognizing that Henry will never be a successful bootblack, urges his friend to purchase a new suit. After a little persuasion, Henry does and only a little later finds a new job.

Nine months late, Dick and Henry are now moving steadily upward. Dick has \$117.00 in the bank, and he can begin to see that he is indeed a changed person, both from his earnings and savings and his study.

But Dick had gained something more valuable than money. He had studied regularly every evening, and his improvement had been marvelous. He could now read well, write a fair hand, and had studied arithmetic as far as Interest. Besides this he had obtained some knowledge of Grammar and geography. If some of my boy readers, who have been studying for years, and got no farther than this, should think it incredible that Dick, in less than a year, and studying evenings only, should have



accomplished it, they must remember that our hero was very much in earnest in his desire to improve. He knew that, in order to grow up respectable, he must be well advanced, and he was willing to work. But then the reader must not forget that Dick was naturally a smart boy. His street education had sharpened his faculties, and taught him to rely upon himself. He knew that it would take him a long time to reach the goal which he had set before him, and he had patience to keep on trying. He knew that he had only himself to depend upon, and he determined to make the most of himself,—a resolution which is the secret of success in nine cases out of ten.<sup>7</sup>

Dick loans poor Tom Wilkins a few dollars to pay rent, and then soon discovers that his bank book has been taken. What could have been a fairly extended investigation is given short shrift, and Dick soon learns that Jim Travis, another lodger, has taken the book. Easily, unbelievably so, Dick traps Travis and gets his bank book back. His loan to Tom Wilkins, Dick finds, gives him greater satisfaction than anything he has previously done.

Tom thanked our hero very gratefully, and Dick walked away, feeling the self-approval which always accompanies a generous and disinterested action. He was generous by nature, and, before the period at which he is introduced to the reader's notice, he frequently treated his friends to cigars and oyster-stews. Sometimes he invited them to accompany him to the theatre at his expense. But he never derived from these acts of liberality the same degree of satisfaction as from this timely gift to Tom Wilkins. He felt that his money was well bestowed, and would save an entire family from privation and discomfort. Five dollars would, to be sure, make something of a difference in the amount of his savings. It was more than he was able to save up in a week. But Dick felt fully repaid for what he had done, and he felt prepared to give as much more, if Tom's mother should continue to be sick, and should appear to him to need it.<sup>8</sup>

Dick is particularly happy when he received a letter from Frank now back in college. Dick's answer to Frank is made easier because of Dick's steady rise in the world.

But the rise must have been too slow to suit Alger, for in Chapter XXVI, Dick's slow rise becomes meteoric, and the pluck and hard work of Dick is almost forgotten because luck now takes over. Dick looks for a new job but finds nothing immediately. Henry needs to go on an errand one afternoon and Dick tags along. On a ferry, a little boy falls overboard, and Dick, forgetting any danger, follows immediately and saves the child. He is rewarded, first with new clothing, second with a visit to the boy's father, James Rockwell. Mr. Rockwell, a prominent businessman clearly doomed to become Dick's benefactor, offers Dick a job at \$10.00 a week, a princely sum for that time. As the book ends, Dick decides to keep his bootblack box and brush to remind him of his humble origins, and Alger concludes with these words.

Here ends the story of Ragged Dick. As Fosdick said, he is Ragged Dick no longer. He has taken a step upward, and is determined to mount still higher. There are fresh adventures in store for him, and for others who have been introduced in these pages. Those who have felt interested in his early life will find his history continued in a new volume, forming the second of the series, to be called,—

FAME AND FORTUNE:

OR,

THE PROGRESS OF RICHARD HUNTER.<sup>9</sup>

**Ragged Dick**, as well as Alger's other tales, establishes the characteristics of the proper and properly ambitious young man. As Tom H. Towers notes,

The virtues of the Horatio Alger hero are exactly those everyone is familiar with. He believes in hard work and honesty—even when it seems opposed to his own immediate interest; he is absolutely trustworthy, refreshingly shrewd, and democratically independent; he is compassionate when men deserve his compassion, and he is pious without effeminacy. Most of all, he is practical and thrifty. He knows precisely what he must do—and what he must do without—to meet the rent on his tenement room or to get one of the fifteen cent dinners which often seem his only sustenance. Poverty is all around him, its dangers only too apparent, and he is more than willing to forego present pleasure for the sake of eventual security. In short, he seems what he is, a late 19th century reincarnation of the Franklin success hero.<sup>10</sup>

The search is not, as so many critics and writers have maintained, for wealth alone since the Alger hero ends a book on the lower rung of the ladder of success. The Alger hero projected into later life may become rich and successful in precisely the way that the Alger myth suggested, but Alger books do not end with the hero suddenly and unexpectedly achieving affluence. Rather, the hero has gained the first measure of fulfillment and respectability, nothing more but certainly nothing less. If he achieves that first measure in great part because of luck rather than pluck or clean living or hard work or clean thoughts, at the very least Alger can be credited with presenting a reasonably respectable case for the Protestant ethic even though it was not the chief element that led to the hero's first great success in the business world.

Alger's literary lapses abound. He was unable to write dialogue that anyone could have uttered in the real world. He almost invariably followed dialogue with some adverbial like "gratefully" or "energetically" or "shrewdly" or "comically" or "soberly," a tendency that Edward Stratemeyer was to use in his Tom Swift books. His descriptions were meager. And his plots less organic than disconnected sets of incidents. Why then was he so very popular? Nye argues,

Alger's plots presented a simplified version of the great and abiding American belief in the ultimate success of individual effort; and whatever his shortcomings as a writer, which were many and grievous, he presented it with tremendous effectiveness to his generation. Second, Alger's books provided boys with their first intelligible picture of contemporary economic life. His was the era of American business expansion, when businessmen worked hard, took daring risks, built giant corporations and amassed incredible fortunes.<sup>11</sup>

And, as Meehan reminds us,

His novels were written and published in a period when the United States was flooded with vast numbers of poor, lower-class immigrants who had come here with the explicit hope of rising from rags to riches. The Alger books assured first-generation American boys of immigrant parents that this was not only possible but, if they were honest and kept their noses to the American grindstone, highly probable. . . They were essentially the lower-class boy's own daydreams set down on paper.<sup>12</sup>

For country boys eager to come to the big city to find wealth and happiness and respectability, Alger's novels were almost guidebooks on the sights and sounds and attractions and depravities (couched in non-depraved language) of New York City.



His books were full of practical and minute information about how one lived and worked in a city once one got there. One could learn from such a novel what kinds of boarding houses there were, and what was fair value in shelter; there were careful lists of the prevailing prices of food and clothing, utensils and amusement; an audience eager for just this kind of practical counsel snapped up these books as fast as they were printed.<sup>13</sup>

Today's reader contemplating Alger's prose must remember that during Alger's time many, perhaps most, people sincerely believed in the Protestant ethic that work, in and of itself, was a positive good, that God had put us on earth to work hard and to be stewards of his universe. It was a time when Dr. Russell H. Conwell went from town to town giving his popular oration, "Acres of Diamonds" urging his intently receptive listeners onward in the struggle for a place in the sun and urging them to remember that they had no right to be poor. It was a time when Elbert Hubbard wrote his popular and didactic essay, "A Message to Garcia," again reminding us that work is good and that man has the responsibility to work hard whether anyone else recognizes his endeavors.

Alger's reputation today rests almost exclusively upon the myth he created and too little on his books. Most critics damn his novels as almost unreadable, badly written, poorly plotted, obviously contrived, and worthless. Unhappily, too many of Alger's critics have read few of his books preferring the objectivity based on pure ignorance to the subjectivity of personal involvement in any of Alger's books. Popular they were—Gruber says 10,000 copies were printed of *Ragged Dick* for the first edition, and while figures vary widely, Mott believes that the aggregate sales of Alger's books reached somewhere between sixteen or seventeen million copies.<sup>14</sup> But widely read today, Alger's novels are not.

Of Alger's many works, not one survives to be widely read today. Contemporary opinion has judged them all to be dull, vulgar and trashy. Alger himself had never claimed them as works of art or great discernment but he had hoped, at least, that they would be edifying. Present day adult opinion condemns them as positively pernicious to right-thinking boys and girls.<sup>15</sup>

Alice M. Jordan predictably discounts any possible value in Alger's novels as only a writer about children's literature or librarian would do.

he name of Horatio Alger, one of the most widely read writers of boys' stories in the whole range of American literature, is a synonym for the success story. Whether or not his *Ragged Dick* and *Phil the Fiddler* resulted in putting an end to the exploitation of boys in the New York street trades, as has been claimed, his books have actually had a wide and possibly hurtful effect upon the reading tastes of countless young people. Supposedly an educated man himself, his writing was cheap and tawdry, his characters impossible, his plots repeated endlessly. Alger vulgarized high ideals and stressed the aim of life to be material success; his values were faults; his moralizing, of which there purported to be much, was insincere because his own life was sordid life.<sup>16</sup>

And as Alger's own time grew dimmer, Alger's view of the successful and rich life seemed more and more remote from reality.

Parents began to protest against what they considered the false values and unreality of the Alger stories, and a number of libraries removed his books from the shelves. They were republished less often in the second decade of the twentieth century, and after World War I, sales declined

rapidly. At the centennial of Alger's birth, in 1932, a survey of New York working children showed that less than 20 per cent of the 'juvenile proletariat' had ever heard of Alger; only 14 per cent had read an Alger book; and, even more threatening, a 'large number' dismissed the theory of 'work and win' as 'a lot of bunk.' A similar survey taken in the forties revealed that only 1 per cent of 20,000 children had read an Alger book.<sup>71</sup>

So why read Alger? Not for novelistic style or texture certainly. Not for literary background assuredly. To read Alger is to know a time and a place and especially a message, a message easily forgotten or ignored today. In an age when charisma has become so much the in-thing as to become a cliché, it is easy to forget a time when personality cults were less important than good, hard work. Many people, usually labeled conservative (though not necessarily politically conservative), would prefer to see young people today reconsider the work ethic, restoring it if possible. The hue and cry of "Let's Get Back to the Basics" heard so often today is little more than the cry of "Let's Get Back to the Work Ethic." Surely the praise given the McGuffey Readers is also praise for Alger, not his style or diction, but his message and his idealism and his examples.

Maybe most of all, to read Alger is to find that he is not nearly as unreadable as some critics claim. To read Alger is to read simple and uncluttered and unsophisticated stories that never pretended or presumed to be great literature. What they did presume to be was to be direct, moral, honest, and relatively interesting stories of young boys on the way out of a shadowy underworld and up into the world of respectability. Given that framework, Alger's novels hold up remarkably well today.

#### NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.
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13. R. Richard Wohl, "The 'Rags to Riches Story': An Episode in Secular Idealism," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power: Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 504.
14. Gruber, p. 49; Mott, pp. 158-159.
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16. Alice M. Jordan, *From Rollo to Tom Sawyer and Other Papers* (Boston: Horn Book, Inc., 1948), p. 32.
17. John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 103.

## FOR SALE

### ELLIS, EDWARD S.

- Strange Craft and Its Wonderful Voyage, A. Henry T. Coates. Red cov. Indians overlooking river with raft. Title & 1st page missing 1.00
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## FAVORITE BOYHOOD CHARACTERS ON THE BRITISH SCREEN

## Part I

By W. O. G. Lofts and D. J. Adley

Most people would agree that few of our fictional heroes measure up to our expectations when portrayed on the screen or TV. Time and time again our nostalgic memories are dashed when we hear the spoken word, or see our hero in action. This is mainly due to the fact we have built up our own mental impressions of the character, and the printed word does not always come off when it is actually spoken. Often or not, the actor only has to utter phrases that had previously thrilled us, to make us cringe or curl up with embarrassment.

The famous Bulldog Drummond stories—brilliant in print—were never really convincing, or so enthralling when shown on film, and Sapper's successor Gerald Fairlie, more or less confirmed this himself in his autobiography—"Sapper just could not write expressions that could be spoken." Another example with a subtle difference was Dick Barton<sup>1</sup> whose nightly adventures on radio thrilled millions. Barton was heard to speak, for he originated on radio—he fitted the bill—and his vocabulary pleased us. Then they made B films about him and the vision was completely destroyed! The films were so poorly and crudely made with ham acting, that they were often accompanied with catcalls, whistles, and laughter and stamping of feet by the suffering audience. One cinema in the London Edgware Road refused to show any more Dick Barton films after a noisy demonstration by a crowd who demanded their money back after an appalling show. Billy Bunter<sup>2</sup> (this time on TV) Batman, and scores of others all became different to the characters as once imagined in the mind's eye—when we watched their antics instead of reading them.

There have of course been successes. Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes was universally accepted as ideal for the part of Sir Conan Doyle's immortal detective, and on the small screen to some extent Roger Moore as The Saint. Certainly he played the part far more convincingly than Louis Hayward and George Sanders in the film versions. On the other hand Sean Connery was far more convincing as James Bond than Roger Moore in the later films, which only proves that however good an actor is he just cannot win them all.

Curiously enough, those of us who encountered some of these fictional characters for the first time via the movies or TV found the casting and acting faultless, for one had not built up a pre-conceived picture. Later in reading the written word for the very first time, one can only draw on the mental image of the actor who had played the part on film. No clearer example could be given than in the Jeeves stories by P. G. Wodehouse which were shown on TV. The writers who read the stories after seeing the weekly episodes on the box, could only visualize Denis Price (Jeeves) and Ian Carmichael (Bertie Wooster).

Sexton Blake<sup>3</sup> must surely be one of the greatest heroes in juvenile fiction, and it is to him therefore that we must turn our attention to first. Throughout his lengthy career he has made a number of appearances on the screen, though few of his fans would revere these episodes. In the main they were a very mediocre lot indeed! In the early days of the cinema, and on the silent screen when the essence of the film was melodrama, they were at least acceptable, but with the coming of the talkies and the sophistication of production and acting methods, they just were not on. They simply could not compete seriously with the many first-rate, and better produced thrillers from America.



Even in the last Blake film with the modernization of the detective's organization, and an update of style, it was difficult to say otherwise, it was Dick Barton all over again. In print Sexton Blake was adored and respected, but no one could take him seriously on film. Situations which were supposed to be thrilling, and were intended to make audiences grip their seats with suspense, only brought involuntary laughter. Some of the attempts to build up an atmosphere of tension and excitement were so crude, that the results achieved were quite absurd.

The dismal record of Sexton Blake on film began quite early in the century in October 1909 with "Sexton Blake," directed by C. Douglas Carlile who also played the part of the detective. This was made for Gaumont, and concerned the sleuth's efforts to save the Squire's daughter from marrying a murderer. Later in December of the same year came "The Council of Three" in which Blake poses as a gangs messenger to save a kidnapped girl. This film was made for London Cinematograph Co. but the principal actor is now unknown. In March 1910 Gaumont released "The Jewel Thieves Run to Earth By Sexton Blake" in which Blake saves a clerk from a gang. Blake is tied to a clock-operated gun in this thrilling film! Two years later in April 1912 Humanity Story Films released "Sexton Blake V Baron Kettler" the Director being Hugh Moss, and concerned Sexton Blake on the trail of secret plans.

"The Clue of the Wax Vesta" followed in April 1914 which was a three-reel film made abroad. Adapted from the first stories of Mademoiselle Yvonne, "stills" of the film were reproduced in the pages of the Union Jack and Pluck. The editorial departments of these papers apparently delighted with the film, but the readers were not. The editorial chats later clearly showed that many readers were far from satisfied with the film.

The sixth Blake film was rather unique in so far as the part of Tinker was played by Lewis Carlton—editor of the Union Jack! Entitled "The Mystery of the Diamond Belt," it was released in July 1914 by Kinematograph Trading Co. (KTC) and directed by Charles Raymond. Philip Kay playing the part of Blake, and as already mentioned, Carlton as Tinker. It should also be mentioned that although the U.J. editor was then 26 years of age, he was extremely youthful, and far from being miscast. Other parts were Douglas Payne as Plummer, and Eve Balfour as Kitty the Moth. Plummer poses as a Lord to rob a merchant, and then holds Blake captive in a cellar. By all accounts this film had a very poor and cool reception.

The next two films released by K.T.C. were also directed by Charles Raymond with the same cast of Philip Kay and Lewis Carlton, the first was "Britains Secret Treaty" in Nov. 1914. The villain this time catches Blake posing as a foreign War Minister, and then proceeds to hang him over Beachy Head with a fuse. This film was adapted from the story "The Case of the German Admiral" by Andrew Murray, the other also in Nov. 1914 entitled "The Kaisers Spies" in which an entymologist runs a spy ring of bus drivers from a tower in Epping Forest!

The following year 1915 seems to have been a good year for Sexton Blake films for there were four—all starring Harry Lorraine as the detective, with Bert Rex as Tinker. These were all produced for I. B. Davidson and K.T.C. and directed by Charles Raymond. First came "The Stolen Heirlooms" in April in which Blake has the hectic time of being drugged by flowers and tied to a sawmill. He found himself in this position whilst saving an ex-gambler from a jewel theft charge. In July followed "The Great Cheque Fraud," a film that featured George Marsden Plummer again played by Douglas Payne—himself to later act the part of Sexton Blake. In this film Blake saves

Tinker from Plummer after escaping a fire by an overhead cable. In September came "The Counterfeiters" from a story by John William Bobin. The characters Ezra Q. Maitland and Broadway Kate were featured. Once again Blake had a hazardous experience, being tied to the waterwheel of an old mill by a counterfeiter and Tinker tied to the lock-gates. "The Thornton Jewel Mystery" was the last of the quartet in November, and tells how a girl frames a drunkard for a gem theft, and Blake is saved from a crooks launch by Tinker's 60 ft. dive. It will be gathered from the length of these films that the plot and accent was on action and melodrama rather than deduction.

It was not until after the First World War that another Blake film was distributed, this being in August 1919, and directed by Harry Lorraine for Atlantic Films (Gaumont). Douglas Payne was the new Sexton Blake, Neill Warrington, Tinker, and Jeff Barlow as Mr. Reece. The film "The Further Exploits of Sexton Blake—The Mystery of the S. S. Olympic" was later written up as a story for the Union Jack, under the same title by Robert Murray Graydon. In this film Blake saves the kidnapped daughter of an inventor who had been murdered for his formula.

In September 1922 Screenplays released "The Doddington Diamonds." Produced by Percy Nash, and directed by Jack Denton, again with Douglas Payne in the role of Sexton Blake.

Six years were to elapse before there was a new series of six films starring Sexton Blake. These two-reelers were produced by Captain George Banfield for British Filmcraft Ltd., with Langhorne Burton taking the part of Blake, and Mickey Brantford as Tinker. An interesting point being that Mrs. Bardell was played by Mrs. Fred Emney. Released in May 1928 they were "The Clue of the Second Goblet" directed by George A. Cooper, and featuring George Marsdon Plummer. "Blake the Lawbreaker," again directed by George A. Cooper. "Sexton Blake, Gambler," directed by George J. Banfield. "Silken Threads," directed by Leslie Eveleigh. "The Great Office Mystery," directed by person unknown, and lastly "The Mystery of the Silent Death," featuring Mr. Reece and directed by Leslie Eveleigh.

So ended the silent productions of the films of Sexton Blake, the later batch of films although being that much better than their predecessors, still did nothing for the detective's popularity on the screen. Nor, indeed for the name of the most accomplished actor, Langhorne Burton. With twenty films behind him, could Blake do any better with the coming of talkies? It was not until July 1935 that the giant MGM studios produced "Sexton Blake and the Bearded Doctor," being based on a story by Rex Hardinge "The Blazing Launch Mystery" and starred George Curzon as the detective and Tony Sympton as Tinker. Directed by George A. Cooper, the story concerned a doctor killing a violinist to defraud an insurance company. A few months later, in October 1935 M.G.M. had another film on release "Sexton Blake and the Mademoiselle" again with the same cast. This story featured Roxane played by Lorraine Grey and was adapted from a Union Jack story by G. H. Tedd entitled "Thou Shall Repay." Once again though from Fox British (Metro Goldwyn Mayer) and directed by Alex Bryce it was a drab film, and whilst the actors were of a high standard, they were unequal to the roles and failed to "lift" the low budget film from the dreary episode it turned out to be, dealing with the familiar theme of Roxane robbing a crooked financier who had ruined her father.

But MGM was apparently determined to make something of Sexton Blake, for in February 1938, came "Sexton Blake and the Hooded Terror," a film.



adapted from Pierre Quiroule's S.B.L. yarn "The Mystery of Caversham Square." The same actors were in Blake's and Tinker's shoes, and Granite Grant was played by David Farrar. Greta Gynt took the part of Mademoiselle Julie and for good measure the part of Michael Larron was played by screen villain Tod Slaughter. Even Pedro appeared, played by himself! The film directed by George King told of Blake's unmasking of a millionaire as head of a hooded gang. MGM's "handouts" read . . .

"Sexton Blake and the Hooded Terror" is all that the thrill-fans can ask for—it has drama, thrills and chills, suspense, romance and comedy. Every moment something is happening and everything that happens whether it thrills or amuses, never fails to entertain.

Though probably a vast improvement on the previous films it still failed to make the grade, and the producers must have surely realized at that point that Sexton Blake would never make them rich at the box-office. Pierre Quiroule (W. W. Sayer) whom one of the writers meets regularly, and on whose story the film was based adds wryly that "no fortunes were to be made from these films—even if they had a West End premier in Leicester Square."

Six years later however, the actor that played Granite Grant—David Farrar—was to have his chance in Sexton Blake's shoes in two new episodes. Firstly came "Meet Sexton Blake" in October 1944, an Anthony Parsons story originally entitled "The Case of the Stolen Dispatches." In this Farrar gave a pretty fair performance as Blake, and he was supported by John Varley as Tinker, and Kathleen Harrison as Mrs. Bardell. John Harlow was the director, and it is also worth mentioning that in this film a young lady made her second appearance on the screen. One who was to become later a very famous actress, the well known Jean Simmons. The plot concerned a crooks theft of his brother's formula for an aircraft alloy.

The second of the "Farrar Blake's" came nearly a year later in September 1945 with "The Echo Murders," a story set in Cornwall where Sexton Blake stages his own death to apprehend some Nazis who are using tin-mines for the center of their activities. The film was based on John Sylvester's "The Terror of Tregarwith" that had appeared in a 1943 issue of the Sexton Blake Library. A remarkable absentee was Tinker, and indeed all the other familiar associates of Sexton Blake. Both of these films were distributed by British National-Anglo American Pictures, and were produced by Louis M. Jackson, being directed by John Harlow.

It was not for another thirteen years in the summer of 1958 that production began at Bray Studios on the film "Murder at Site Three," a Francis Earle Production for Regal International. The film set in the mold of the "new order" was based on W. Howard Baker's story "Crime Is My Business," and ultimately released in August 1959. Geoffrey Toone was well cast as Sexton Blake, but unfortunately the casting of Richard Burrell as Tinker was a great mistake. Whereas the new look Blake pictured him as a junior partner in the organization, Burrell looked neither adult enough or suitable at all in any respect. Jill Melford was also poorly cast as Paula Dane, and the film had little in common with the original novel which was well written and exciting. The film scripted by Paddy Manning O'Brine concerned Blake's eventual exposure of a security chief as a spy—aided by a truth drug! There were numerous faults in detail, and on the whole the film tended to be very thin in plot.

Twenty-six films of Sexton Blake then, and none of them up to the standard hoped for by the eager fan of the great detective. Perhaps we should not be too critical, for one should remember the majority were made in the

experimental early days of silent pictures. It is doubtful if we shall ever see others, or any better. The writers were on the whole excellent, producers and directors first-class. The Production Companies were of high calibre, and generally speaking the actors were good performers. Yet, with all these assets, they simply could not make Sexton Blake viable on the screen. Perhaps in the end it is money that has to decide the quality, and a low budget wilm is odds-against right from the start.

### Notes

1. A famous private detective.
2. A fat boy in school fiction.
3. Nick Carter's equivalent in England.

### End of Part I

## MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

### New Members

- 366 Richard Schubert, Box 970, Lewis University, Lockport, Ill. 60441
- 367 Charlie Worden, P. O. Box 548, Coolidge, Ariz. 85228
- 368 Robert V. Riordan, 1355 Old Springfield Pike, Xenia, Ohio 45385
- 369 Robert E. Sawyer, 204 Mill St., Gahanna, Ohio 43230
- 370 Richard Bowerman, 2045 Murray Hill Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44106
- 371 Donald F. Elder, 51 Library St., Chelsea, Mass. 02150
- 372 Joseph W. Curran, 4889 Pineview Drive, Vermilion, Ohio 44089
- 373 Dennie White (Book World), 2602 W. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind. 46222
- 374 Crager J. Boardman, D.V.M., RD 3 Box 26, Camden, New York 13316

### Change of Address

- 250 Bart J. Nyberg, Jr., 4128 Arthur, Brookfield, Ill. 60513
- 190 John Riley, 212 Michael Drive, Syosset, N. Y. 11791
- 50 Rev. Donald L. Steinhauer, RD #1, Nescopeck, Pa. 18635
- 111 J. Randolph Cox, RR 5 Box 10, Northfield, Minn. 55057

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## BOYS' BOOK FIRST EDITIONS

By Harry K. Hudson

In the last few years, I have seen increasingly frequent references to boys' book first editions. I have had questions and comments on the subject from correspondents and have seen the term used in ads, catalogs, articles, brochures, etc.

I will state categorically that with some relatively few exceptions (and I will contritely and sincerely apologize if anyone can show me otherwise) it is impossible to determine first editions of boys series books.

I will cover the exceptions first. Note that I say boys series books. In the case of most non-series books it is possible to ascertain first editions. This is also true for the series books of prominent early authors such as Alger, Castlemon, Ellis, Kellogg, Henty, Optic, etc. Excellent bibliographies exist on the works of Alger, Castlemon, and Henty, and one is in preparation on Ellis.

In the case of series books issued by the more prestigious publishers, such as Appleton, Dodd-Mead, Doubleday, Harper's Holt, Penn, Scribners, etc., it is also possible to determine first editions. Many of these books actually state "First Edition." However, in terms of number of titles, the contribution of these publishers to the field of boy's books is rather small. Collectively they issued a number of series, but most series ran only two to six volumes. Incidentally few of the series of these houses achieved any great popularity.

The vast majority of series books (I would estimate 80 per cent) were published by a group of firms which I will call the popular publishers. These were Altemus, Barse & Hopkins, A. L. Burt, Cupples and Leon, Donohue, Grosset and Dunlap, Hurst, McKay and Reilly and Britton (Later Reilly & Lee). It is impossible to determine a first edition of these publishers. It is, of course, possible that there may be a few exceptions. I would appreciate hearing of such.

The popular publishers issued all of the well known top-selling series. A few examples are the Dick and Co. saga, The Pony Rider Boys, The Big League Series, The Boy Allies, The Boy Chums, The Golden Boys, Baseball Joe, Bomba, The Motor Boys, Don Sturdy, The Hardy Boys, Jerry Todd, Poppy Ott, Tom Swift, The Rover Boys, The Boy Aviators, The Oakdale Series, Frank Merriwell (hard cover), The Airship Boys and the Big Game Series.

The reason that a first edition cannot be distinguished is that these publishers issued a title, and then reissued it year after year, printed from the same plates. Thus, the book would be identical through any number of printings.

Most of these publishers changed formats and dust jackets as time passed. Thus, one can readily tell an early edition from a late edition. But an early edition is not necessarily the first issue.

Take the Motor Boys as an example. There were three binding colors used. The first was a dark blue-green, which was changed successively to light gray and brown. A blue-green book is an early copy, but not necessarily a first. If you are lucky enough to have a blue-green copy with a dust jacket of uncolored terra-cotta colored paper with black lettering and artwork, you've got a damned early copy. But not positively a first.

There are some negative approaches—that is, means of telling that a book is NOT a first edition. I stated above that the books were reprinted repeatedly from the same plates. This is true for the book proper. However, the publishers' ads for other series, which usually appeared in the rear of

books were changed from time to time. Thus, a book which shows a 1915 copyright date, but carries ads showing titles issued in 1922, is obviously not a first edition.

A few years ago the Tatter Bugle, a Leo Edwards fanzine, sponsored some research on the publishing sequence of some of Edward's books. The rear ads were one of the factors considered. Bob Chenu and other came up with sequences for some title, but as I recall, they never established that the earliest version had only one printing. If a first version, from ads, format, etc., can be established, and it can be further established that that version had only one printing, then of course it is a first edition. If the first version had two or more printings, there is no way to distinguish between them. (Yes I know about plate wear, but I doubt that approach would be very definitive in such cases.)

This brings to mind one of the possible rare exceptions. I believe, but am not positive, that Tom Swift and His Planet Stone had only one printing by G&D. If this is so, then any G&D copy of the title is a first. Suitable research should be able to verify this point one way or the other.

Another negative approach is to check the list of the series titles which frequently appeared in the first books. If volume ten of a series carries a list going up to volume fifteen, it is surely not a first edition.

Thus, the assorted references one sees in print regarding Tom Swift, Boy Allies, Motor Boys, Rover Boys, Hardy Boys, etc. first editions is just misrepresentation. However the terms "first format" or "early edition" could be used and have some meaning.

There remains a group of publishers I haven't mentioned, the various early publishers of series books. These include, among others, Chatterton, Estes, Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, Mershon, Platt & Peck, Saalfeld, Stitt and Sully. I left these to last because they fall into an in-between category. Some of their books can be established as first editions and some cannot. In most cases, I'll confess that I couldn't supply positive proof either way.

The total output of this group was not large, L, L & S and Saalfeld were the most prolific. (Saalfeld, of course issued reprints of books of other publishers for many years.)

Mershon's major contribution was that they were the initial publisher of the Rover Boys. The first eleven titles were copyrighted by this company. (To be factual, 10 of the first 11, Vol. 9 was copyrighted by Stitt). Since there were eight years between the publication of the first and the eleventh title, Mershon almost surely reissued most of the titles. So, again a Mershon Rover Boy is an early copy, but not positively a first.

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## RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES

MAUM GUINEA: OR, A DIME NOVELIST LOOKS AT ABOLITION, by Michael K. Simmons. Article in Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. X No. 1, Summer, 1976. An excellent summary of the novel and its impact on the thinking toward slavery and abolition. (Sent in by Jack Bales).

NANCY DREW MYSTERIES AUTHOR MODELS HEROINE AFTER HERSELF, by Richard Hatch, New York Times News Service. Arkansas Gazette, April 6, 1977. A good article about Mrs. Harriet S. Adams and the Nancy Drew stories.



# NEWS NOTES

Ralph F. Cummings is entering the hospital this month for an operation and wishes his friends and correspondents to be patient. He will eventually get to the responding to all letters and orders.

I attended the Horatio Alger Convention at Waltham, Mass. and had a great time swapping stories and experiences in the book collecting game. Got to handle the rarest of Alger books, Timothy Crump's Ward. Dale Thomas graciously brought his copy so that Alger collectors could have the thrill of seeing it first hand. Bob Bennett brought some of Alger's correspondence to be viewed by the attendees. Dick Seddon was a most gracious host. Look forward to seeing many more members at the next convention to be held in Jacksonville, Illinois, specific date to be set. The convention made me wonder of a get-together of this sort could be held for the Happy Hour Brotherhood.

For the Horror movie buff, Dover Publications has issued a large size 52 page book of movie posters in full color. It is edited by Alan Adler who capsulizes the 46 movies pictured.

A new publication called MASTHEAD is being published by Walter A. Day, P. O. Box 1009, Marblehead, Mass., devoted to the collecting of historical newspapers. Subscription is \$9.00 for 12 monthly issues or \$3.00 for a 4 issue trial subscription.

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## HENTY COLLECTORS!

Collectors of Henty's writings and Hentyana are invited to write to the address below for details of a proposed Henty Society. Several collectors believe such a Society would benefit its members by enabling them to contribute and share, on a common interest basis, information about G. A. Henty and his work. New biographical details have recently come to light, and these were published in April in the DNRU.

It is proposed that membership of the Society will be open to anyone who has an interest in Henty. Booksellers will be welcome to join, but it is not intended that the Society shall be used as a means of advertising books for sale or exchange.

Further details will be sent on request. Inquirers are requested to state their interest, i.e. collector or bookseller, etc., and if possible to enclose a list of collectors known to them who might be approached at a later date should they not respond to this announcement. **Please do not telephone.**

Roy Henty, Church House, 60 Painswick Road, Cheltenham, England

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## Letters

To all DNR members:

I thought that you might be interested in hearing about a situation which has occurred.

Alan Dikty has published a book entitled "The American Boys' Book Series Bibliography." I have never seen a more brazen or flagrant plagiarism.

In 1969 I published "A Bibliography of Hard-cover Series-type Boys' Books." Although rather well-received I was not particularly happy with it; there were too many errors and it was incomplete. For the meat of his book, the bibliographic listings and the author-to-series and publisherto-series cross-reference, Dikty has copied my book almost word for word. He has used the same arrangement and set-up. The coding except that he did change the code symbols. I'm surprised that he had the originality to come up with a different title for the opus.

Obviously, any bibliography or biography on the same subject is going to show a certain amount of similarity and duplication. But in this case, it is apparent that Dikty just copied my work—for he copied all my errors—even obvious ones. For example, "Charles Buddington Kelland" for "Clarence Buddington Kelland." A comparison of the two books will readily verify the above.

Dikty did add approximately fifty series which were not covered in my book.

Although I deplore the plagiarism, I'm happy to see that the Dikty book is what it is. When I heard that he was publishing a bibliography, I was afraid that he would beat me to the punch.

I'm writing, in fact have just about completed in draft form, a greatly expanded boys' book bibliography. The Dikty book does not offer any competition. This is a true bibliography, not a glorified check-list, like my early book and Dikty's. The new work will give a complete, detailed description of formats of all editions of series, copyright date of each title, artist, detailed description of dust jackets, and where applicable, notes covering interesting side-lights.

It covers the series added by Dikty, plus about seventy more.

I hope that this will be published early next year.

Sincerely, Harry K. Hudson

(Other letters very critical of Mr. Dikty's book were received from Allan R. Ware, Bob Chenu and George Holmes.)

Dear Ed:

Found out something vg for cleaning books. Pat Farrell of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., deserves the credit for this.

Pat met an old retired German bookbinder and the gentleman was kind enough to give Pat this tip.

Take a clean cloth, dip it into milk. Wet it good. Wring the cloth out. Rub the book cover gently with the damp cloth. Keep cleaned books on the side for at least 24 hours. It is very important that separate cloths be used for red, blue, green, etc., covers.

I tried it on various Edwards, Sturdy's, etc., and it does work very well. Perhaps some of the boys/girls would be interested in this info.

Seckatary Hawkins remains as elusive as ever. I am lacking three to complete my set. I consider them the toughest of all series.

Cordially, George Holmes



Dear Eddie:

My grandfather grew up in the house Erastus Beadle owned in Cooperstown, New York. One of the first things his father did was to throw out the entire collection of Beadles Dime Novels in the house's library.— Bill Lippincott, Dover-Foxcroft, Maine 04426.

Back numbers Reckless Ralph's Dime Novel Roundup (quite a few reprints, can't be helped). Don't have the complete set of No. 1 to 237 inclusive, but almost, lacking only a few numbers. \$25.00 postpaid, or 20c each. Have at least 230 numbers or more. Also 2 indexes, 1 Pioneer and Scouts of the Old West, Birthday number, War Library list and Dime Novel Catalog.

**Ralph F. Cummings**

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## SINGLE ISSUES NEEDED, Old Periodicals

Student and Schoolmate, 1863, January; 1864, May, August; 1871, January, March, September, December

New York Weekly: Vol. XXI, 1876, #20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 43, 44, 45, 46

NOTE: I have the Alger item. Looking for the 2 Pa. Coal Mine items.

Golden Argosy: Vol. I, No. 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 50, 51, 52

Vol. II, No. 13, 14

Vol. V, No. 1, 2, 3

Argosy: Vol. VII, No. 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

Vol. XIV, No. 501, 502, 503, 504, 505

Good News: Vol. III, No. 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77 (this is April thru Sept., '91)  
Vol. XV, No. 36 (May 16, 1897)

Army and Navy Weekly: Vol. I, Nos. 1, 2

American Boy Magazine: 1907, January, February, March, April, May, June '07

Bright Days: Vol. II, Nos. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. Oct. 10, 1896 thru Dec. 12, 1896, inclusive

Golden Days: Vol. IX, Nos. 20, 21, 22, 23.

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